

# Stop Hiding, Colonel North

By John R. Stockwell

**T**here is only one course of action for Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North. He must stop listening to attorneys and politicians and tell the truth before the Congress. Yes, Colonel North must do this at full risk of self-incrimination.

Perhaps I am one of the few people in the nation who have the right to offer such advice.

In 1975, as a paramilitary specialist for the Central Intelligence Agency, I sat in on 177 meetings of a subcommittee of the National Security Council as the coordinator of the Angolan secret war. My title was "Chief of the Angola Task Force."

Like Colonel North, I flew abroad to coordinate covert policies. I supervised the movements of arms through Israel, the opening of Swiss and German bank accounts to funnel money to our clients, ran a disinformation program, hired mercenaries and dealt with terrorists.

Like the Iran-contra operation, there were questions about the legality of our activities, and we had to consider the possibility of indictment. We had delivered arms to South Af-

rican forces in Angola, encouraged the recruitment of mercenaries inside the United States and misled Congressional committees, in violation of the Hughes-Ryan Amendment requiring the executive branch to inform Congress of covert activities.

To cover up our activities, high C.I.A. and State Department officials gave false testimony to Congressional committees, seemingly a matter of perjury in which I might have been accused of conspiracy.

During the Angolan operation, we begged the Congress "not to jiggle the hand of the surgeon" during the operation. Once the activity was terminated, some files were purged to inhibit any investigating committee from gaining proof of our illegal activities.

Unlike Colonel North, I refused to plead the Fifth Amendment when testifying for several days before the Senate Intelligence Oversight Committee and committees of the House in 1977. Instead, I chose to tell the full truth at the risk of self-incrimination, indictment and whatever.

I took this course for several reasons. One, I doubted that any jury in this land would be likely to convict a decorated officer for conscientiously implementing a foreign policy that had been ordered and approved by members of the National Security Council, however misguided the policy may have turned out to be.

Second, I had serious misgivings about what we had done and how we had done it. Airing these mistakes to the appropriate offices of the Congress and to the public seemed the best way for the nation to learn from them.

My third reason was that I sincerely believed in our system of government. True, it lurches and careens about the world, sometimes making hard-to-forgive mistakes. Without question, the men and women in office are fallible and occasionally corrupt. It is always possible that some of them may even not have the best of intentions. Crimes sometimes go unpunished and some injustices take years, decades, even a century or two (in the case of slavery and civil rights) to be corrected.

But the balance of power our Founding Fathers so brilliantly contrived has nevertheless functioned like a gyroscope to keep us from plunging irretrievably into anarchy or despotism.

Congress has the constitutional responsibility to oversee activities such as Colonel North's and my own. If I believed in the system, I had to answer the committee's questions. It was a matter of pride and honor. Of course, my attorneys advised me of the Fifth Amendment, but the decision was my own. As it turned out, Congress and the Justice Department did not indict us, and I was twice vindicated.

Obviously, there are differences between Colonel North's operations and my own. The Reagan team, of which Colonel North was the running back, went much further than we did in the scope of their activities. And while our results in Angola were less than brilliant, we were professionals at the covert game and structured to play it. Colonel North and the National Security Council were not.

Whatever happens in the current investigation, Colonel North is not likely to be viewed with pride by any other marines. I note this as a former Marine Corps officer. The generals he apparently pushed around aren't likely to forget if he ever goes back into the ranks. While his questionable activities were conducted in civilian clothes, he chose to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in full uniform. His pleading the Fifth Amendment and transparent appeals for sympathy were insults to that uniform and to his rank. The Representatives' expressions of sympathy were inappropriate.

But far worse, if reports that Iran helped finance the bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 turn out to be true, there may be nothing Colonel North can do that will satisfy his fellow marines, active or retired.

But if Colonel North stops hiding behind his rights, truthfully answers the Congressional committee's questions and volunteers to take his punishment if necessary, he would at least reaffirm his patriotism and commitment to the American system of government.

*John R. Stockwell, a writer and lecturer, is a former marine who spent 13 years in the Central Intelligence Agency as a paramilitary specialist in Congo, Vietnam and Angolan operations. He detailed the Angolan operations in a book published in 1978.*